

THE MOST SPECIAL GIFT OF ALL: DIGNITY

They are veterans. They are seniors. They are homeless. They are low-income residents. They are recent immigrants. They recently lost their jobs as executives and scholars, among other professions. They are on parole. They are mentally and addictively ill persons. They work yet can't make ends meet. They are families with children...

These are persons who quickly and easily become invisible to the rest of society. These are the faces of the guests at St. Anthony's Dining Room, where they are not forgotten and no one is turned away from receiving a nutritious hot meal.

Located just three blocks from my office in San Francisco's Tenderloin District where 1 in 2 adults lacks the resources to provide enough food for themselves or their families, St. Anthony's Dining Room has been serving Tenderloin residents for over 60 years. A week before Christmas, my staff and I were privileged to help serve over 1,200 hot meals in the Dining Room. It was a transformative experience for us, even for a group of colleagues for whom community service is nothing new. Some reflections from my staff:

"I was impressed by how well-managed the organization was...and the non-judgmental and non self-congratulatory approach to its work..."

"The experience to serve this community was a gift, very humbling, and a good reminder about what's important, among other things... Many of the individuals I interacted with expressed their gratitude and offered holiday wishes and other kind words too. They made me smile! I was impressed with the humility of the staff and volunteers, some of whom have been serving at St. Anthony's for 25 and 30 years. "

"What stood out to me from the experience is the long-term commitment of the regular senior volunteers who have been serving there several times every week for years – they are the ones who really make charity-giving at St. Anthony's possible. They also reminded me that meaningful community service is not just about giving your time or money occasionally, but rather doing it regularly, and more importantly, with your heart in it. "

"After my St. Anthony's experience I felt more appreciative of all the friends and family I have and more in the Christmas spirit than before. It was an opportunity to reconnect with our collective humanity by demonstrating to our society's forgotten brothers and sisters that they are not alone and to look them in the eye with a smile so they know we see them, not with judgment but with an open heart."

"For me, the St. Anthony's experience was all about my new friend Ms. P, a woman who has suffered through periods of poverty and duress herself but who has now returned to St. Anthony's as a volunteer. That Monday, she was giving back by handing out cups of punch with a great welcoming smile. "

"What impressed me was that both the clients and volunteers came from "all walks of life." One volunteer I met was a drummer in a heavy metal rock band; another was a retired stock broker."

"I realized the power of a smile as I had the honor of serving the guests of St. Anthony's. It was a heartwarming experience."

"The St. Anthony experience reminded me of the importance of helping those who are in between their blessings. It was a privilege and honor to serve the St. Anthony guests."

"For me, St. Anthony underscores the disparity between rich and poor, the consequences of acceptance and marginalization, the tragedies of life, and the inequities of American capitalism. Yet, it also inspires hope, instills awe (the humanity and commitment of St. Anthony staff, donors, etc.), and demonstrates the need for fundamental change in American and global values."

"It is a very heartwarming experience for me. I feel so good that I am able to be of service to the community, even for a few hours."

"What stuck most in my mind was the organization's mission to offer not just food and community, but dignity. For people so often ignored, I felt like I was offering dignity every time I looked into one of the guests in the eyes and said hello."

I write about our community service at St. Anthony's Dining Room upon the approach of the New Year, reflecting upon the millions across this nation who continue to struggle to get back on their feet from the Great Recession, the effects of cuts to federal and state aid, and the injustices and harsh conditions of life that are experienced by those who are hungry, those who are homeless, those who are victims of violence, and those who are challenged with illnesses or addictions. And as I so reflect, I am overtaken with a tremendous sense of hope that each of us can make a difference in the life of another, not just during the holiday season but year-round. I am grateful for the privilege to serve as the First District Member on the Board of Equalization, and along with my talented staff, for the opportunity to lend a hand to hundreds of small business owners and nonprofit, community-based organizations since the beginning of the Great Recession to help them stay in operation.

As California's economy continues to improve, let us not forget the millions who lack the resources to meet their basic needs. California, the world's 9th largest economy, still is home to 1 in 6 who live below the federal poverty level; and of those 1 in 6, 1 in 4 are children. Thank you to those Californians and businesses that have been so generous with their money and resources, making it possible, for example, for St. Anthony's Dining Room to serve 2 million pounds of food 365 days this year.

Let us all dedicate ourselves to join the community of humanity to share a smile, a handshake, an embrace, or a word with those among us who are less fortunate, letting each of them know as they heal, "You are worthy."

Happy holidays, and best wishes for a brighter 2013. And remember, "Dignity is for all seasons."

